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Feature

The Bechtlers' Production and Some Other Aspects of the Southern Gold Rush

By David Ginsburg

Before I began researching the amount of gold coinage produced by the members of the Bechtler family in North Carolina in the mid-19th century, I consulted my copy of *Private Gold Coins and Patterns of the United States* by Donald Kagin. The book includes a table that is probably familiar to anyone acquainted with the Bechtler family's activities:

Coined	Amount	Fluxed (dwts)
Jan 1831-Dec 1834	$109,732.50	395,804
Dec 1834-Dec 1835	$695,896.00	711,583
Dec 1835-Aug 1836	$471,322.50	397,410
Aug 1836-May 1838	$770,329.50	201,141
May 1838-Feb 1840	$194,560.00	24,060

The table shows coinage from January 1831 to February 1840 and the weights of gold "fluxed" during that period. This presents two obvious questions: 1) why does it only cover from January 1831 to February 1840, when the Bechtlers' mint may have operated until 1850, and, 2) what does "fluxed" mean?

An Internet search led me to Thomas Featherstonhaugh's 1906 article, "A Private Mint in North Carolina." Mr. Featherstonhaugh began his article by quoting his grandfather's 1847 description of a visit to Rutherfordton and the Bechtler mint. His curiosity evidently piqued, the younger Mr. Featherstonhaugh visited the town himself in January 1906.

In the article, Mr. Featherstonhaugh summarized Christopher Bechtler's arrival in the United States and his early activities. He also quoted the August 1831 advertisement from the *North Carolina Spectator* that announced the availability of Mr. Bechtler's services to the local gold miners.

Regarding the Bechtler coinage, he quoted from *A Description of Ancient and Modern Coins in the Cabinet Collection of the Mint of the United States*, the Report of the Director of the Mint for 1840 and a very informative Senate Report 290, which is from early 1840 and deals primarily with the export and import of

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C. BECHTLER $1, 30 grains (Kagin 1). Struck before August 1, 1834 and the first gold dollars struck in the United States.

image image

C. BECHTLER $2.50, 67 grains, 21 carats. (Kagin 10) Struck after August 1, 1834.

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CC. BECHTLERS $5, PE Dated August 1, 1834. Rutherford reverse. (Kagin 17). Struck after August 1, 1834.

(Images courtesy of James Gray)

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specie in 1839.

Mr. Featherstonhaugh next gave his opinion of some Bechtler coins (he was fortunate to see "coins of each denomination which are kept as curios by the people of Rutherfordton") and described the rollers the Bechtlers used to roll bullion into coin strip. Mr. Featherstonhaugh reported that he "…made every effort to find a Bechtler rifle…", but he "…was, however, unable to even see one, though they are well remembered by the older citizens and had a great reputation in their day." Mr. Featherstonhaugh seemed not to be aware that his grandfather, according to his reminiscences, purchased a rifle, which he directed Christopher Bechtler to inlay his name on the barrel "… with the gold found on his own farm…."

Mr. Featherstonhaugh concluded his article by describing his visit to the former Bechtler property. He reported that while the house had burned down, he "… saw on every hand signs of the past activities of this industrious and enthusiastic German." He visited the former graves of Christopher, August and Charles Bechtler, as the "…remains of all three were exhumed and taken away for reburial by a relative several years ago and there is no one of the Bechtler blood left in the town."

As I alluded, Senate Report 290 contains many valuable nuggets for the numismatic historian. The bulk of the report is taken up by detailed tables listing exports and imports of specie for 1839, broken down by reporting custom house. Some of the tables (New York's, for example) are sufficiently detailed to list not only the carrying ship and its origin or destination, but also the specifics of its specie cargo: e.g., Patriot Doubloons (from the newly independent Latin American countries), Mexican Dollars, US half dollars, etc.

The Report includes a March 12, 1840 letter from Mint Director Robert M. Patterson to Secretary of the Treasury Levi Woodbury, replying to a request for a table of the annual product of the gold mines of the United States. Director Patterson stated that having received contradictory answers to earlier questions, this time he referred to the superintendents of the Charlotte and Dahlonega mints. While the superintendent of the Dahlonega mint provided only a vague reply, John Wheeler, the superintendent of the Charlotte mint, provided a much more substantive response.

Mr. Wheeler began by commenting that some $2.9

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million in gold from American mines was coined at Philadelphia and Charlotte up to 1839, but that the "… American Almanac for 1832…states that 'the weekly product of the mines was $100,000, or $5,000,000 annually; and that by far the larger portion of the bullion went to Europe, particularly to Paris, and that but a small portion was coined at the United States mint, Philadelphia' ".

Mr. Wheeler pointed out that many of the North Carolina gold mines were owned or leased by foreigners and that the capital to exploit the mines came from abroad, as well. As a result, the owners' agents "…made prompt returns by remitting the bullion direct to Europe." He also reported that the local merchants and bullion purchasers took their gold to New York because the assayers there paid more than the mint.

As further evidence that only a minority of the North Carolina gold production was coined at the Philadelphia and Charlotte mints, Mr. Wheeler pointed to the Bechtler mint. Referring to its output, he stated "… much of it is carried by travelers, emigrants, traders, and others, into Kentucky, Tennessee, and elsewhere…. From our experience, but little has been [re]coined; at least we have not received $500 of it here." Mr. Wheeler also commented that much of the bullion produced in North Carolina was "…sold to manufacturers in bars or grains, which of course never reaches the mint." He concluded his letter by estimating that the North Carolina mines had yielded $10 million in gold since their discovery and were currently producing $400,000 in gold annually.

In support of his conclusion, Mr. Wheeler attached three appendices to his letter, the first of which is the table at the beginning of this article, which was from a letter from Christopher Bechtler dated February 20, 1840. Eureka! I have now determined why the table only extends to February 1840. Mr. Wheeler also explained that fluxed (in this context) refers to gold processed into bullion rather than coins.

At 80 cents per pennyweight (which Mr. Wheeler reported was the average assay in North Carolina at the time), this would indicate that Mr. Bechtler had turned about $1.4 million of bullion into bars, which led Mr. Wheeler to his second appendix: that $3 million of North Carolina gold had been coined at the United States mints up to the end of 1839, that $3.6 million had passed through Mr. Bechtler's hands and that $3.4 million had been sold to manufacturers or sent to Europe. Total production of the North Carolina mines

up to 1839 came to $10 million.

As was typical of the time, government reports were often reprinted by commercial periodicals. Mr. Wheeler's comments were deemed sufficiently interesting that they were reprinted no less than three times.

Mr. Wheeler's letter was reprinted in 1) Hazard's *United States Commercial and Statistical Register* for July 1, 1840, which reprinted the letter in its entirely; 2) *The American Almanac and Repository of Useful Knowledge for the year 1841*, which reprinted most of the letter (even retaining the quotation from the 1832 edition of *The American Almanac!*); and, finally, some four years later, in 3) Hunt's *The Merchants' Magazine* for July 1844, which also reprinted most of the letter (and even added "It is not generally known, we believe, in the eastern states, that there is a private manufactory of coin in North Carolina.").

Now, as a result of a few short Internet searches, I have answered my questions about the Bechtler mint, gained a better picture of the North Carolina gold mines of the time and, obtained a copy of Senate Report 290, which may help me create a more detailed view of US specie exports and imports of the time.

(Article sources available upon request.)

News You Can Use

Welcome New Members
David Yawn (ysanctus@aol.com).

Please direct inquiries about membership to the SGS website's About Us page.

Writer's Needed
One of the purposes of the SGS is to "enjoy each member's knowledge."This newsletter is one of the ways this numismatic knowledge is dispersed. The frequency of the newsletter is driven by the number of submissionsfor publication.

The editor of the SGS eNewsletter needs new material and welcomes the opportunity to review your original article for publication. Articles should be relevant tothe study of the gold coins and related history of the Dahlonega, Charlotte, and New Orleans branch mints and private minters Templeton Reid and the Bechtlers.

If you do a presentation at a gathering or other venue, consider compiling your notes into an article. Do not worry about the grammar. The editor will do the rest.

Electronic manuscripts should be submitted by email to dcnumisma@charter.net.

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The Southern Gold Society was formed to increase the enjoyment and study of Southern gold coins and related history, through an informal, relaxed mix of education and fellowship. The society is reminiscent of those of a bygone era, in which connoisseurship and a gentlemanly appreciation of Southern gold coins is the order of the day.

Purpose

- To facilitate the enjoyment and study of the gold coins and related history of the Southern branch mints (Dahlonega, Charlotte, and New Orleans) and private Southern minters (Templeton Reid and the Bechtlers).
- To enjoy each member's knowledge and friendship in an informal manner.
- To provide a relaxed, pleasant environment in which to meet during selected coin shows and other convenient events.
- To encourage the appreciation and preservation of a Southern gold coin’s original surfaces.
- To consolidate the information, resources, and talent available to enthusiasts of these historic Southern gold coins.

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